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## Participation throughout the decades: how the zeitgeist influences both theory and practice – A Case Study

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### Abstract

“Participation” is the cornerstone of democracy, applauded by virtually everyone. The multitude of definitions and interpretations given to participation however leads to difficulties in translating the concept into practice. These difficulties exist as participation is often dismissed as an infinite, intrinsic aspect of a society and merely used as a means to an end. Participation changes with the zeitgeist in which it is framed. This evolution is researched for this article and placed in relation to participation in Vietnam using the case of a Locally Managed Marine Area.

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### 1. Introduction

As we search for understanding on participation, we learn that participation is not clearly defined and influenced by the zeitgeist in which it is used. Already in the 1960s participation is a widespread concept without any precise and meaningful content; it is used to refer to a wide variety of different situations by different people (Pateman, 1970). It is not until the 1980s that a clear shift occurs from participation influenced by political turmoil to participation framed in development themes. At this stage, participation is linked more and with environmental and sustainability issues. Participation evolved in Vietnam in a similar matter as it did in Western societies, although the influence of participation in Western societies has left Vietnam with a duality of participation; one

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which more resulted from the political turmoil that existed in Vietnam, and one which resulted from the influence of Western development programmes in Vietnam. This article will provide insight in the evolution of participation in Western societies and in Vietnam and it will provide insight in how these have influenced each other. This article will not provide an answer as to how participation should or can be translated into practice, but it aims to provide an overview of both the successes and failures that have occurred in the past few decades and the reasoning for this failure or success.

## 2. Methods

Literature review was conducted on the different typologies and conceptualisations given to participation both in literature and in programmes and projects used in different disciplines and different countries. The typologies and conceptualisations were researched in a chronological time frame, providing insight in how participation has evolved in the last few decades and how it is interpreted now. No exclusion criteria was made based on the discipline in which participation is used, i.e. environmental management, as insights from other disciplines allow us to place participation in a time sensitive perspective. Furthermore, a comparison is made between participation in Vietnam and participation in other countries in the world placed in relation to the zeitgeist in which it is framed. Empirical data from interviews, focus groups and questionnaires conducted in the Locally Managed Marine Area (LMMA) in Van Hung commune in Khanh Hoa province in Vietnam is used to support or refute theories from literature. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with key stakeholders involved in the LMMA from national, provincial, district and commune level. This included governmental stakeholders, non-state actors and local representatives such as village leaders. Questionnaires were conducted with households in the Van Hung commune and the village leaders achieving a representative amount of respondents to allow for generalisation in the locality of Van Hung. Exclusion criteria were made based on age; respondents cannot be younger than 18 years old. Inclusion criteria comprised of a representative amount of respondents in relation to the % of main livelihood activities in the villages (fe. 30% of households earn a livelihood from aquaculture activities so 30% of respondents represent households who earn a livelihood from aquaculture). Differentiation was made between the different villages to allow for differentiation between social organisations based on different livelihood patterns.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Participation from the 1960s until now

When participation is used by scholars and managers in all disciplines most frequently the reference is made to 'the ladder of participation' by Arnstein (1969). This ladder was developed as an answer to the question 'what is participation' in a time influenced by the powerlessness of the 'have-nots' and the racial, ethnic, ideological, and political opposition expressed when participation was defined as a redistribution of power (Arnstein, 1969). Participation became a popular word in the 1960s, influencing the political vocabulary (Pateman, 1970). In France participation was exclaimed by De Gaulle, in Britain it influenced the Skeffington report 'people and planning' (1969) and in the US it was included in the anti-poverty programme (Pateman, 1970). Pateman (1970) expressed that the widespread use of the word led to the disappearance of any precise and meaningful content and is used to refer to a wide variety of different situations by different people. The popularity of 'participation' is however strange as political theorists and political sociologists give only a minimal role to participation in the widely accepted theory of democracy (Pateman, 1970). More extreme, the last few years of the 1960s were characterised by the conviction of writers on democracy that the idea of maximum participation of all people needed to be drastically revised if not rejected completely (Pateman, 1970). In the late 1960s and the early 1970s participation in the US was influenced by exceptional political turmoil resulting from the anti-Vietnam War protests and the civil rights movement in which the young; accused of being the instigators, were prominent (Beck and Jennings, 1979). The young were more politically active than their elders which challenged the previously accepted relationship between age and rate of participation (Milbrath and Goel, 1977). The main difference here lies in the participation in protest or demonstrations signifying confrontation politics. However, not only confrontation, but the entire political game was

appealing to the young in this era and it was clear that the political turmoil of this time drew these young into political activism at much higher rates than is normal for young people (Beck and Jennings, 1979). In Europe similar student revolts occurred questioning the traditional decision structures (Lane and Ersson, 1999). The 1970s were characterised by strong voices demanding changes in government policy and leadership (Lane and Ersson, 1999). Where in the 1960s and 1970s citizen participation was mostly linked with politics, a shift occurs in the 1980s when participation is framed more and more in the development theme and a clearer link is made with sustainability. In the mid 1970s, participation became more important for development agencies and by the 1980s participation became associated with the sharing of benefits by the poor (Cornwall, 2002). The era of the 1980s gave rise to the establishment of new local level institutions that continued to multiply over the following decades (Cornwall, 2002). Within the development literature less attention is given to political participation and more to social participation, citizen participation and participatory methods. Even though participation in the 1960s and 1970s was highly influenced by the political turmoil, it was located outside the state by those excluded from existing institutions. Whereas later, with less political turmoil, participation is framed in existing development projects and programmes (Gaventa and Valderrame, 1999). In the beginning of this century more attention is being paid to sustainability and the importance of all types of participation is recognised in order to achieve this. From the 1990s until now more focus is placed on the methodologies in participation than the conceptualisations. Participation has become more inherent in development literature and management, with a clear link to environment emerging in the 1990s. Already in the 1990s the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) pushed to incorporate more citizen involvement into environmental protection programmes (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004) for which two tiers of benefits of participation are considered (process and outcomes) and two beneficiaries (Nelson and Wright, 1995; Beierle, 1999; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004).

### *3.2 Participation in Vietnam*

Participation in Vietnam is highly influenced by the violent history of the country. Starting in the 1940s the First Indochina War highlighted the division between North and South Vietnam as the South Vietnamese fought the French occupying the North. In the 1950s the Second Indochina War started further amplifying the North-South division. The North was support by China and other communist allies and the South was supported by the US and other anti-communist allies. In 1968 the war reached its most violent point with the Tet Offensive and in 1975 the war ended with the capture of Saigon. The following years were influenced by the Reunification of Vietnam in 1976 and the 'Doi Moi' economic reforms in 1986. Doi Moi has influenced the way environmental resources are managed in Vietnam. Natural resources are managed in such a way that natural resources are utilized to fuel the national development. Forest management for example was organised in such a manner that it facilitated forest protection, and state-owned forest and agriculture enterprises developed to establish forest production systems. (Phuong, 2000) These policies however did not consider the needs of the local people, resulting in little attention being paid to these policies and programmes and the continuation of deforestation and degradation (Cai 1999; Phuong, 2000). This indicates that participation was not considered as important after Doi Moi as local people were not involved in the development of these programmes and policies. This believe is still apparent in current environmental management programmes and policies. Stakeholders in Vietnam indicate that although the understanding of the importance of participation exists among managers, scientists and communities, the Party (i.e. the communist party) is not willing to change its way of thinking and will not allow participation to be included in official government programmes and policies. The response of the Vietnamese community to this unwilling of the Party to allow citizen participation is bi-fold. On the one hand the Vietnam War has left the Vietnamese people with an attitude of 'waiting'. Stakeholders in Vietnam indicate that people have learned over the past few decades that the government is 'the provider of all'. People have been dependant on the government for their livelihoods, education, health care.... This dependence has created a society that waits for their government to give them instructions. On the other hand however a trend of 'we have waited long enough' has occurred. Stakeholders in Vietnam indicate that they have realised that waiting is not going to help and if they do not do it themselves, nobody will. This has led to

fast increase in community based actions in all aspects of life (i.e. economic, social and environmental). Specifically for environmental management an increase is seen with community based environmental management programmes initiated by either the local community themselves or non-state actors. The Vietnamese are starting to change their behaviour and are using an approach which entails the starting of small scale, local actions themselves and then showing these 'good practices' to the government, hoping it will lead to institutionalisations of these actions and dissemination to other parts of the country. A clear example of this is the Locally Managed Marine Area in Khanh Hoa province. This programme was developed by non-state actors in cooperation with the local community of Van Hung. Currently several such initiatives exist in Vietnam and a national programme on Marine Protected Areas has included these LMMA's as valuable programmes and policies.

### *3.3 The case of the Locally Managed Marine Area*

This duality in participation that currently exists in Vietnam forces us to ask the question as to whether participation defined in Western societies can be translated into participation defined in Vietnam? If participation is influenced by the zeitgeist in which it is framed than how do we translate participation defined by one zeitgeist to another? Participation in Vietnam is not framed in the same political, social or cultural climate as it is in Western societies. However, it is often blatantly copied. Vietnam finds itself influenced by the same powerlessness of the have-nots as it was in the 1960s. It however uses modern western interpretations given to participation. Will scholars in Vietnam reform to these interpretations or will they also subscribe to the conviction of the scholars of the 1960s proclaiming that 'participation of all' needs to be rejected in a democracy? Locally Managed Marine Areas are widespread throughout Asia and the world. Vietnam adopted this management form for the first time only a decade ago making it a new approach which still faces a lot of challenges. It has however achieved great strides for participation even if the environmental outcomes are still minimal. As it was discussed in the previous section, LMMAs have been included in the national environmental programmes and policies as a result of participation at local level. This shows that participation in LMMAs initially follows the bottom-up approach. The lack of a top-down approach (commonly opposed as a sustainable approach) however negatively influences the outcomes of the management programmes as stated by stakeholders in Vietnam. These stakeholders indicate that although the Party has a large negative impact on both the outcomes and the participation in management programmes, their involvement is essential in Vietnam. The current political and social climate of Vietnam does not allow for sustainable management without the involvement of the government. Therefore argumentation is made for a combination of both the bottom-up and top-down approach. When we examine LMMAs as a bottom-up approach, resulting in a top-down approach, participation as defined by Western societies can be translated relatively easily into the Vietnamese context. This is due to the assumption that Vietnamese people are active participants in their society and have a voice. However as it was stated before, the duality of participation negatively influences this participation. Although a trend for active participation is emerging, most people or even all people in certain aspects of their lives still have the 'waiting' attitude making participation as a combination of a top-down and a bottom-up approach very challenging. This attitude gives power to the government who opposes participation and takes away the voice of the people, both those with the 'waiting' attitude and those with the 'we have waited long enough' attitude.

## **4. Recommendations**

The duality in attitudes does not allow the direct copying of participation from Western societies. As this is currently often the case in Vietnam, many programmes and policies, both initiated by state and non-state actors including local communities, face great challenges. We therefore recommend that policies and programmes in Vietnam are reviewed and placed in the current duality of participation existing in Vietnam. Furthermore, we recommend further research both by national and international scientists. We argue that this is necessary as experiences from other countries are still valuable even if they cannot be blatantly copied. The LMMAs in Vietnam have shown that approaches from other countries can be valuable in Vietnam. It is however necessary to further adapt these to the Vietnamese context.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion it can be stated that participation is not a clearly defined concept and changes with the zeitgeist in which it is used. In Western societies participation has been influenced greatly by political turmoil and has resulted in an institutionalization of participation in all (or most) aspects of the political, social and cultural lives of its citizens. The history of Vietnam, although also paved with political turmoil has resulted in an unbalance between participation in Vietnam and in Western societies. The current zeitgeist of Vietnam has created a duality in participation, which either may or may not even itself out. As we have no way of predicting the future, it remains difficult to assume that participation will evolve in the same manner as it did in Western societies. Furthermore, we pose ourselves the question as to whether this is desirable. Stakeholders in Vietnam agree that participation is valuable; the question however remains how to translate Western participation into the Vietnamese context. In the past few decades Vietnam has seen many failed attempts to include participation in management programmes. Initiatives such as the LMMA's however show a more successful side of the story.

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